

*Plenary Lecture 3***Wastelands of the mind: the identity crisis of India's savanna grasslands****Abi Tamim Vanak**

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On March 19, 1972, Lt. Hiroo Onada of the Japanese Army surrendered his arms on the Philippine Island of Lubang. He and his comrades hid on the island for 29 years, unaware that Japan had lost World War II. They had viewed with extreme suspicion all contact attempts to let them know the war was over. During the nearly 30 years that Onada and his platoon lived on the island, they had killed at least 30 Filipinos, injured at least a 100 others, and by the end, also cost the lives of three of his companions.

This quirky bit of history illustrates the dangers of not just being out of touch with reality, but also of not keeping up with the times. Closer home, the Department of Land Resources (DLR) under the Ministry of Rural Development continues to follow archaic and irrelevant definitions of land use categories. Take, for instance, the definition of “wasteland”, first propounded by John Locke. According to the anthropologist Judy Whitehead, Locke’s “concept of wasteland, as opposed to value-producing land, constituted a founding binary opposition that constructed how landscapes were categorized. Associated with wildness, wilderness, and savagery in the 19th century, the category of wasteland also defined who would and who would not become most vulnerable to dispossession and/or enclosure”. Thus, common village lands that were used for pastoralism and that were essentially untaxable, were deemed wastelands. These were appropriated by the state and divided amongst the peasantry, because it was assumed that private ownership and intensive cultivation was the only way to make land more productive.

Continuing the use of this outdated terminology the “Wasteland Atlas of India” produced by ISRO for the DLR includes waterlogged areas and marshes, which are known to be essential for groundwater recharge; mountains under permanent snow, the source of our greatest rivers; savannah grasslands and pasturelands, on which depend the lives and livelihoods of millions of livestock and pastoralists; deserts, sand dunes, rocky outcrops, inselbergs, and

plateaus, rich geological features that are also home to a unique set of fauna and flora under the broad category of wastelands to be “developed” and converted to “productive” land uses.

What emerges is an ecologically illiterate and myopic view of what constitutes “productive” land being used to label 15% of the country’s geographical area as wastelands. That’s an astounding 46,000 sq. km of land (larger than Switzerland) that is supposedly “unproductive”. The government proposes that this land can be made productive again by planting grasslands with alien tree species, quarrying the hills to feed the construction boom, and handing out vast stretches of land to industry, and thus alienating the people who depend on it, destroying endangered wildlife and ecosystems, and concretizing the rural landscape.

The idea that wastelands are unproductive continues to be pervasive and is used by various agencies to gain control over marginal landscapes and remake them for productive purposes with dire results.

In 2010, the Ministry for Environment and Forests, sought to cordon off large stretches of grassland for a project to reintroduce cheetahs in India. “It is important to bring the cheetah back as it will help restore the grasslands of India” they said (The Guardian 29 Jul 2010) when approving the plan. In contrast to this, the Ministry for Rural Development sought to acquire savanna grasslands and other habitats for industrialization. “Maharashtra, MP, Rajasthan, J&K, Andhra, Himachal have significant percentage of wasteland that can be exploited for development purposes” (Times of India, 16 Oct 2013). Consequently even the benign sounding Integrated Watershed Development Program resulted in destruction of large tracts of semi-arid savannah grasslands in Maharashtra.

Savanna grasslands have suffered the most in India both historically and in current times. Under the British, nomadic pastoralists were sedentarized, and



the grasslands they depended on were converted to agriculture using canal irrigation. The resultant salinization of these soils has now rendered once productive grasslands to wastelands. They assumed that forests were the natural vegetative cover in India, and any forest “blanks” were an aberration, or a sign of a degraded ecosystem, and continued to raise plantations of water hungry non-native trees across the countryside. This ignores the fact that grasslands in India have existed as natural ecosystems as far as 50 million years ago as evidenced by fossil records. Indeed, this notion that equates “eco-friendly” with tree planting has driven India’s green policy such as the “Green India Mission”, and the Compensatory Afforestation Programme and Management Authority (CAMPA).

The contention that grassland systems are less productive is clearly a straw man. The economies of several countries depend heavily on grasslands. Not for a second would anyone consider labeling the vast savannas of the Serengeti with their spectacular assemblages of large fauna as wastelands, nor the areas inhabited by reindeer grazing Lapps in Norway and Sweden. Why then do we in India, with more than 500 million livestock, and millions of pastoralists dependent on these for fodder consider these areas as wastelands. While previously this viewpoint was from an agro-centric perspective, i.e. land that did not grow food that could be taxed was land lying waste; in the neo-liberal era, declaring land as wasted has become the easiest way to grab it in the name of industrialization and development. A prime example of this is the allocation of approximately 10,000 acres of “kavals” or grazing lands reserved for the Amrit Mahal breed of cattle to several national institutions such as DRDO, BARC, IISc and some private companies.

This perception of non-forest natural areas as being wastelands is now deep-rooted in the public psyche. To change this mindset will require recognition of three main issues:

1. Non-forest natural areas, especially grasslands, marshes and even rocky outcrops and glades are not marginal habitats, but are as important and valuable as other forested systems. Indeed many of these habitats not only have unique sets of flora and fauna, but also human livelihood systems that are exquisitely adapted to these systems. For example, savanna grasslands support several endemic and critically endangered species such as the Great Indian Bustard and blackbuck. They are also home to nomadic pastoralists who have

for centuries understood the vagaries of the climate they live in and developed complex rotational grazing systems to prevent over-grazing and yet take advantage of the seasonally ephemeral resources.

2. The categories of wastelands developed by the government are based on their ‘productive’ potential. So a demarcation of these areas lends itself to subsequent ‘improvement’. However, this delineation is based on a highly biased, archaic notion of production, often ignoring the cultural, ecological and traditional association of local people with the land. For example, most of the upper reaches of the Himalayas, and almost the entire district of Ladakh are classified as wastelands. The irony of categorizing the “abode of the gods” as a wasteland is seemingly lost. The forms of ‘improvement’ that are envisaged for these non-forested wilderness areas conform to ideas of forested, irrigated or industrialized landscapes, and are ecologically illiterate, culturally insensitive and ignore centuries of customary practice.
3. The exercise of wasteland categorization violates several laws or policies of the government. Several wildlife sanctuaries and national parks (e.g. Kutch wild ass sanctuary, Hemis national park, Rollapadu blackbuck sanctuary) notified under the Wild Life (Protection) Act (1972), wetlands and marshes that are notified RAMSAR sites, sand dunes that protect our coasts from storm surges and which are notified under the Coastal Regulation Zone Act are all labeled as wastelands.

There is thus a clear need for a policy shift away from these archaic categorizations of landscapes, to one that is more in tune with the socio-ecological fabric of our country. One that values land intrinsically, and not just as a means of production from a very narrow perspective. Indeed, the only categories of true wastelands that the Wasteland Atlas of India shows are industrial and mining wastelands. The rich diversity of landscapes in India does not deserve the ignominy that has been heaped on them.

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